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ABSTRACT

A recent theoretical model proposes that the amounts of involvement, structure, and autonomy support children and adolescents experience in their relationships with parents and teachers have a strong influence on their own sense of competence, autonomy, and relatedness within the school context, and that these self-system processes in turn exert a strong influence on academic performance and engagement with school work. This study examined whether this model could be expanded to include constructs which have evolved from the family systems perspective. Seventh and 10th grade students (N=544), approximately 40% of whom had been labeled at-risk for academic failure, completed questionnaire items drawn from the Rochester Assessment Package for Schools-Student version (RAPS-S), the High School Questionnaire, an early version of the RAPS-S, and the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale, version 3. The results showed family disengagement to be the quality of family functioning which most clearly distinguished adolescents who appeared to be at-risk for academic failure from those who were not at risk. Family rigidity and both chaotic family functioning and family enmeshment also appeared to have negative influences on adolescents and their school functioning. These results provide support for the idea that family dynamics can have an important influence on school functioning in adolescents. (NB)

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Patterns of Family Interaction Style, Self-System Processes and Engagement with Schoolwork: An Investigation of Adolescents Rated as At-Risk or Not-At-Risk for Academic Failure

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One of the major goals of educational research has been to identify the factors which either promote children's academic success and successful adaptation to the school environment, or lead to academic failure and disaffection from school. The characteristics of the children's home and school environment, as well as factors internal to the child, such as the child's IQ or level of self-esteem, have all been important foci of theoretical and empirical work in this area. Recently, Connell and his colleagues (Connell, in press; Connell and Ryan, 1987; Ryan, Connell and Deci, 1985) have attempted to explain how home, school and self-system processes may influence academic outcomes. In their theoretical model, Connell et al have proposed that the amounts of involvement, structure and autonomy support that children and adolescents experience in their relationships with parents and teachers have a strong influence on their own sense of competence, autonomy and relatedness within the school context, and that these self-system processes in turn exert a strong influence on their academic performance and engagement with school work. This model and the empirical data supporting it will be described in more detail in other papers presented at this symposium. The purpose of the present study was to determine whether the Connell et al model could be usefully expanded to include several important constructs which have evolved out of the family systems perspective.

The family systems perspective is a general theoretical orientation first developed during the 1950's and 1960's which is currently shared by a diverse group of family researchers and psychotherapists. Most generally, individuals who subscribe to this view believe that the presence of emotional health or dysfunction in an individual can best be understood by examining both the manner in which the individual's family characteristically functions as a complex whole, and the nature of the roles the individual has come to play within the family system. Family systems theory has shown an increasing influence in both psychological research and clinical work, and offers a perspective on child and adolescent development that has not typically been used in educational research.

The specific family constructs used in this study are family cohesion and adaptability, the two curvilinear dimensions which make up the Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems (Olson, Sprenkle and Russell, 1979). Cohesion and adaptability are the terms used by Olson et al to describe the two general family dimensions which they concluded had been consistently described in the previous literature on family functioning. A pictorial representation of this model is presented in figure 1. In this model, cohesion is defined as the style of emotional bonding family members experience with one another, and ranges from disengaged to enmeshed, with scores in the "balanced" range (separated or connected) being considered

optimal. Adaptability is defined as the ability of a family system to change it's power structure, roles and rules in response to stressful events, and ranges from rigid to chaotic, with scores in the balanced range (structured or flexible) also being considered optimal. To avoid confusion in the following discussion, balanced range scores on cohesion will be referred to as "optimally cohesive", whereas balanced range scores on adaptability will be referred to as "optimally adaptable".

Cohesion and adaptability were measured in the present study through the use of the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale, version 3 (FACES-III), a 20-item, self-report questionaire. This measure has been shown to discriminate between clinical and non-clinical controls (see Olson et al, 1983 for a review). In general, families with members referred for a variety of emotional problems have been found to function at the extreme ends of these two dimensions (i.e., either disengaged or enmeshed on cohesion and either rigid or chaotic on adaptability), whereas non-clinic families have been found to have mid-range scores on both of these two dimensions (i.e., optimally cohesive and optimally adaptable).

In the present study, a set of adolescent self-report questionaires were administered to a socioeconomically mixed sample of 544 seventh-tenth graders from regular classrooms in a suburban school district. Approximately

40% of these subjects had been labeled as "at-risk" for academic failure by school administrators and teachers, and the remaining 60% were matched controls randomly selected from the labeled students' classmates. The items contained in these questionaires were drawn from both the Rochester Assessment Package for Schools-Student version (RAPS-S) and the High School Questionnaire (HSQ) (Connell, Wexler and Dannefer, 1987), an early version of the RAPS-S, as well as from the FACES-III.

The primary goal of this study was to test the theoretical predictions that a) subjects from optimally cohesive families would have more optimal self-system processes and more positive school outcomes than subjects from either disengaged or enmeshed families, and b) subjects from optimally adaptable families would have more optimal self-system processes and more positive school outcomes than subjects from either rigid or chaotic homes. Six self-system processes and three school outcome variables were studied. Each of the self-system process variables were associated with one of the three basic psychological needs (competence, autonomy and relatedness) described in the Connell et al model. Two of these self system processes were associated with the need for competence (i.e., belief that one knows effective strategies for obtaining academic outcomes and belief in personal capacities to obtain academic outcomes), one was associated with the need for autonomy (perceived autonomy

in school), and three were associated with the need for relatedness (self-esteem, emotional security with teachers, and emotional security with peers). Due to time limitations during the questionnaire administration, only 184 subjects received items pertaining to the latter two variables. These subjects were selected randomly from the larger sample of subjects. The three academic outcome variables used in this study were: classification as being "at-risk" or "not-at-risk" for academic failure, self-reported academic performance, and self-reported engagement with schoolwork.

In order to test the hypothesis that subjects with scores in the optimal range on cohesion and/or adaptability have more adaptive self-system processes, and more positive school outcomes, than subjects with extreme scores on these two dimensions, a set of t-tests were run. In this set of analyses, four different comparisons of group means were made for each self-system process and school outcome variable. First, subjects reporting family cohesion in the disengaged range were compared, on each self-system process and school outcome variable, to subjects reporting family cohesion in the optimally cohesive range. Similar comparisons were then made between subjects from optimally cohesive vs. enmeshed families, rigid vs. optimally adaptable families, and optimally adaptable vs. chaotic families. The t-values and significance levels for each of these comparisons are

reported in Table 1.

The results of the t-test analyses suggest that the data generally support the Circumplex Model, but in a much more complex and differentiated manner than expected. More specifically, the results are in exact accordance with predictions from the Circumplex Model for the emotional security with peer variable (i.e., subjects scoring in the optimal range on both family system dimensions report more emotional security with peers than extreme-range subjects), and diverge from Circumplex Model predictions in ways which make theoretical sense for the other eight self-system process and school outcome variables.

The clearest finding from these analyses is that adolescents from disengaged families show significantly less adaptive scores on all nine self-system process and school outcome variables than adolescents from optimally cohesive families. These results are in accordance with theoretical prediction, and suggest that the experience of disengagement within the family has a pervasive adverse effect on adolescents' academic success, self-appraisals and affective experience within the academic environment. Specifically, family disengagement appears to negatively affect not only adolescents' grades, but their sense of academic competence and autonomy, relatedness with teachers and peers, and engagement with schoolwork.

The less adaptive school functioning seen among

students from disengaged families may be due to the lack of emotional closeness which characterizes these families. It is likely that this lack of emotional closeness would lead adolescents from such families to experience a low amount of nurturance and little emotional support from other family members. This relative lack of emotional support and nurturance would presumably make it difficult for these adolescents to develop the kind of self-confidence and emotional security which is reflected in adaptive self-system processes, and would leave them less inclined to identify with parentally-approved values and goals related to education or other endeavors. Both of these factors would be expected to lead to less favorable school outcomes for these students.

The comparison of adolescents from enmeshed families with adolescents from optimally cohesive families yielded a more complex set of results. For all variables except emotional security with teachers and peers, adolescents from enmeshed families had scores which were significantly or marginally significantly higher than adolescents from optimally cohesive families, a result which is contrary to theoretical expectation. However, adolescents from enmeshed families were less emotionally secure with peers at a marginally significant level, and adolescents from enmeshed and optimally cohesive families did not differ significantly from each other in their emotional security with teachers. Taken together, these results suggest

that, although family enmeshment may actually enhance many aspects of school functioning, it may have a detrimental effect on adolescents' peer relationships.

The favorable school outcomes and high sense of competence, autonomy and engagement in the academic domain found among students from enmeshed families may be a result of the intense emotional bonds these adolescents experience in their families. Due to these bonds, these students may identify strongly with parentally-approved norms and goals related to education and other endeavors. This identification may lead them to put more energy and effort into school activities, and, subsequently, to experience more success and feel more engaged with these activities, than students from non-enmeshed families. However, since enmeshed families by definition have difficulty allowing members to move out of the family circle in order to establish primary relationships elsewhere, adolescents from such families might be expected to experience subtle or not-so-subtle rejection by family members for the development of strong peer relationships, and might therefore be expected to approach peer relationships with less confidence and inner security than their peers from optimally cohesive families.

The third important result from the analysis of academic domain variables is that adolescents from rigid families have significantly worse scores than adolescents from optimally adaptable families on the following

variables: belief in personal capacities to obtain academic outcomes, perceived autonomy in school, self-esteem, emotional security with teachers, and self-reported engagement with schoolwork. However, adolescents from rigid families are not significantly different than adolescents from optimally adaptable families on any of the following variables: belief that one knows effective strategies for obtaining academic outcomes, at-risk group classification, and self-reported performance in school.

The ability of adolescents from rigid families to learn successful strategies for obtaining academic outcomes, and their ability to use these strategies to both obtain acceptable grades and to avoid being percieved by school staff as at-risk for academic failure, may be a result of the clarity and strictness of the rules and role expectations they experience at home. Their experience in dealing with clear rules and roles at home may have given them the opportunity to learn what it takes to function successfully in structured environments, of which school is one. However, the lack of choice and flexibility these adolescents experience in these rigid families may have prevented them from developing an internalized sense of competence, autonomy and emotional security, qualities which are necessary to become fully and non-anxiously engaged in the process of learning. In other words, adolescents may be able to develop the skills they need to perform adequately in school when exposed to the clear

expectations and rules found in rigid families, but may need to experience the choice and flexibility found in non-rigid families in order to develop the sense of self-confidence and emotional security which is necessary for true engagement in the academic enterprise.

The fourth important result from the above analyses is that adolescents from chaotic families are less emotionally secure with peers, at a marginally significant level, than adolescents from optimally adaptable families. However, these two groups of adolescents do not differ significantly on any of the other, more academicially relevant, self-system process and school outcome variables. These results suggest that chaotic family functioning has neither an adverse nor an enhancing effect on academic functioning, but does have a negative effect on peer relationships.

The fact that chaotic family functioning appears to have an impact on the security of peer relationships but not on overall academic functioning may be due to the differences in the amount of structure provided by the school and peer milieus, respectively. Peer relationships are relatively fluid and unstructured, requiring peers to develop a shared consensus about normative rules and roles. The academic environment, on the other hand, tends to be very structured, with rules and roles being imposed on students by school personnel. It is possible that students from chaotic homes, where a consistent consensus

on appropriate rules and roles is never established, do not develop the subtle social skills necessary to establish a sense of order and predictability in relationships with others. This deficit would be expected to cause difficulties in peer relationships, where these kinds of social skills are needed, but not in interactions with structured environments such as school, where they are less important.

In summary, the results of this study suggest that there are three important ways in which family dynamics can affect school functioning in adolescents. First of all, family disengagement, or chronic emotional distance among family members, appears to have a pervasive negative influence on adolescents, contributing to a low sense of competence and autonomy in the academic domain, emotional insecurity with both teachers and peers, lack of interest in schoolwork, and low grades. This is the quality of family functioning which most clearly distinguishes adolescents who appear to be at-risk for academic failure from those who do not.

Secondly, family rigidity, or lack of flexibility in family rules and roles, appears to have a pervasive, but less readily apparent, effect on school functioning. It appears that adolescents from rigid families feel able to obtain the academic outcomes they desire, and can obtain satisfactory grades, but don't have either the internalized sense of competence, autonomy and interest in

learning, or the self-esteem and emotional security with others, that are so important for success in later life. Since these adolescents tend not to be seen as being at-risk for academic failure, they may escape the notice of school administrators. However, the pervasiveness of their intrapersonal deficits, and the potential effect of these deficits on adult functioning, should be of concern for educators.

Finally, both chaotic family functioning, or the lack of consistent family rules and roles, and family enmeshment, or the overinvolvement of family members in each other's lives, appear to have their major negative effect on adolescents' sense of emotional security with peers. Although adolescents from families with these qualities tend to function as well as, or better than, their peers within the academic domain, their difficulties with peer relationships should be of concern to educators, since these difficulties may continue into later life, and may negatively effect their future vocational and interpersonal functioning.

The results of this study provide support for the idea that family dynamics can have an important influence on school functioning in adolescents. If educators want to improve the ability of adolescents to both stay in school and to make the most effective use of their education, they must become advocates of change both within the school system and within the community at

large. The provision of effective mental health services to those families who need it, and the presence of an effective community response to social and economic forces which threaten to disrupt family functioning, should be fundamental concerns of educators and policy makers alike.

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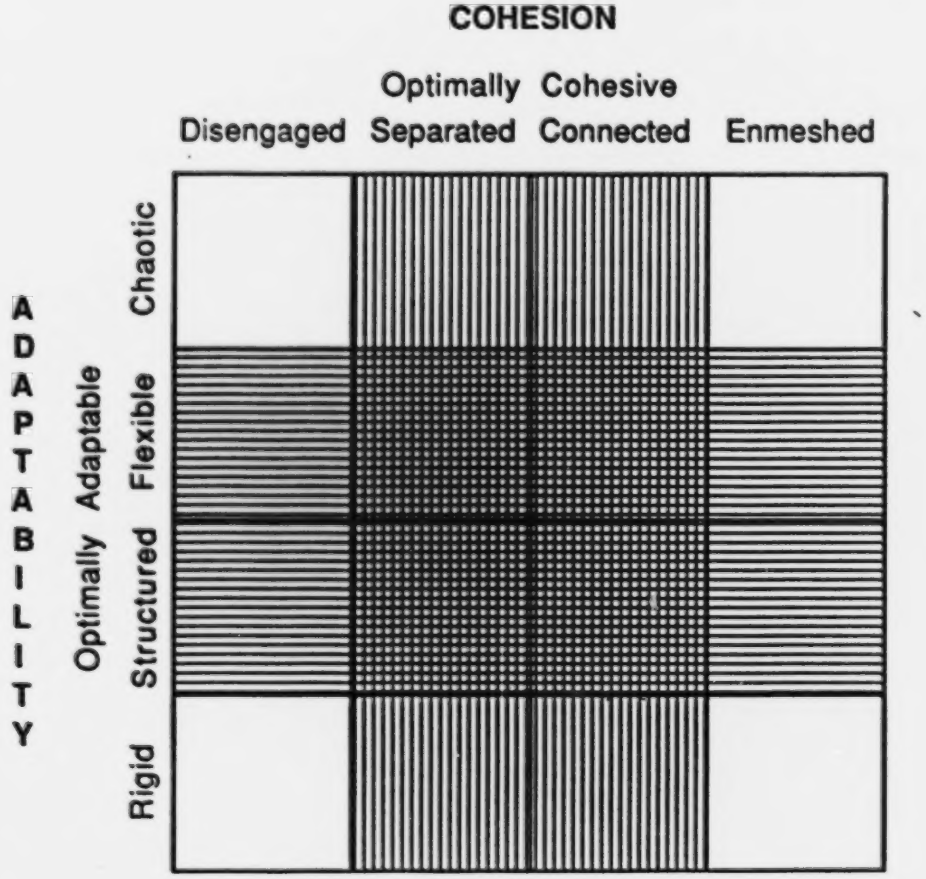
Figure 1
Circumplex Model
of Marital and Family Systems



Adapted from Olson, McCubbin, Barnes, Larsen, Muxen and Wilson (1985)

Table 1

T-Test Analyses

	Subgroups of Subjects Compared			
	Cohesion Dimension		Adaptability Dimension	
Self-System or School Outcome Variable	Disengaged vs. Optimally Cohesive	Enmeshed vs. Optimally Cohesive	Rigid vs. Optimally Adaptable	Chaotic vs. Optimally Adaptable
Belief that one knows effective strategies for obtaining academic outcomes	** **-2.76**	+ -1.71	-0.05	**1.01**
Belief in personal capacities to obtain academic outcomes	**** **-5.04**	*** -3.69	* **-2.13**	-0.60
Perceived autonomy in school	**** **-6.49**	*** -3.63	** **-2.59**	**0.73**
Self-esteem	**** **-5.46**	** -3.30	** **-3.19**	-0.27
Emotional security with teachers	**** **-4.88**	-1.55	* **-2.22**	**0.61**
Emotional security with peers	** **-2.91**	+ **1.68**	** **-2.63**	+ **-1.72**
At-risk group classification	*** **-3.70**	* -2.09	-0.38	**0.14**
Self-reported school performance	**** **-4.95**	**** -5.02	-0.54	**1.45**
Self-reported engagement with schoolwork	**** **-9.23**	*** -3.65	**** **-4.33**	-0.07

T-values in **boldface** indicate that the balanced score was greater than the extreme score, as predicted by theory.

\+ p<0.10
* p<0.05
** p<0.01
*** p<0.001
**** p<0.0001